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THE SPIRIT OF THE COMING ERA

AN ADDRESS

BY

HON. ROBERT LANSING

SECRETARY OF STATE

DELIVERED ON OCTOBER 10, 1918, AT A DINNER
IN CELEBRATION OF THE ONE HUNDREDTH ANNIV-
ERSARY OF AUBURN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

AUBURN, N. Y.



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Class

Book

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THE SPIRIT OF THE COMING ERA.

It is the natural and the proper thing for one on an occasion such as this, which marks the close of a century of usefulness by an institution devoted to the advancement of right thinking and right living, to remember the past and rejoice in all that has been achieved. But in these days of war we are irresistibly drawn to the present. Before this critical time in the history of mankind the past was an agreeable theme, because, in the course of events which have gone to make up the lives of nations and institutions and to mark the progress of our intellectual development, we read—or at least thought that we read—the possibilities of the future.

The last four years have in large measure shaken our faith in the ability of the human reason to draw true deductions from a series of accomplished facts. Only after this terrible catastrophe had fallen upon the world did most of us realize that had we not misinterpreted history for the past quarter of a century we would have perceived what the end would be. We know now that this great conflict was inevitable. We know now that a savage beast controlling the peoples of Central Europe had been waiting for the day when it would be strong enough to leap upon an unsuspecting world and master it. What we know now is very different from our peaceful dreams of five years ago.

In view of our blindness, of our failure to read the future aright, we may well hesitate to look forward beyond the day when Prussianism will be ground to powder by the might of the united democracies of the earth. I fix upon that event as the beginning of a new era for mankind, because it requires no divine gift of prophecy to foresee its accomplishment. It is as certain as anything human can be which lies in the future. We know that we will be the victors in this world struggle. We know that the German military leaders and their forces

will be defeated. With that mighty task ended the world will enter upon a new stage of civilization. It is to that era we must turn our thoughts even now in the midst of this great war if we are to be ready, as we ought to be ready, to meet intelligently the difficult problems which we will be called upon to solve.

For this reason I do not look back into the past, but forward into the future, which is so vitally important to us all. We must cast aside many of our conceptions of the proper relationships between nations and between individuals; we must revise many ideas which we believed to be established for all time; we must free our minds of ancient prejudice and cherished theories, so that we can adjust our lives to the changes which are bound to come.

The principles upon which a general peace will be made between the warring nations have been clearly stated by President Wilson. He declared them in his addresses of January 8, February 11, and July 4, and again in his masterly and comprehensive utterance at New York but two weeks ago. These principles of justice must guide those charged with the negotiation of the great treaty of peace and must find expression in that momentous document which will lay the foundation for a world transformed.

For anyone whose words might be interpreted as the views of this Government to go further than the President has by proclaiming a catalogue of peace terms seems to me unwise. Premature declarations of details too often work mischievous results, particularly if the selfish interests of many nations are involved. Let us recognize the true bases of peace and stand rigidly in support of the principles on which these bases are founded. We entered the war to maintain those principles, and they must be maintained at all hazard.

Thoughtful men must know that the peace which is to come will not be a lasting peace if its terms are written in anger or if revenge rather than the desire for strict justice and the common good is the underlying motive of those who are charged with the grave responsibility of drafting the greatest treaty which this world has ever known.

I think that it is sufficient in these days of toil and struggle, while the Beast is still at large, to assert that the peace which

will come when the world is safe will be a peace founded on justice and righteousness, a peace which will satisfy the just but not the unjust wishes of all peoples. Let us not forget that while stern justice without mercy is un-Christian, mercy which destroys justice is equally un-Christian. I am thankful that I am a Presbyterian and believe in a God of justice as well as a God of mercy. When the time comes to balance the account—and it seems to be drawing near as the vassals of Germany seek refuge from the day of wrath—the authors of the frightful wrongs committed against mankind should not be forgotten.

It had not been my purpose to consider peace even to this extent because my thought was of the time beyond. I shall go no further but assume that a universal peace internationally just will usher in a new era and a new phase of civilization, to which we will have to conform our ideas so that we may not futilely oppose but may wisely apply the irresistible influences which these years of conflict have brought forth and which will materially affect the social order.

The period of readjustment and restoration which will follow the disorganization and destruction caused by the war will tax human wisdom to the uttermost. In a conflict so universal as to involve the whole earth, in a conflict which has compelled the mobilization of all the manhood and resources of the nations, required the expenditure of wealth fabulous beyond comprehension, and forced governments to assume extraordinary powers over national and individual energies, new impulses of human action have been set in motion not only in the political, industrial, and commercial spheres, but in the structure of society and in the spiritual life of mankind. Many of the fundamental principles of the present social order will be threatened, some will be changed, some discarded, while novel and possibly extravagant and dangerous doctrines will find earnest and honest advocates. With all this we must reckon.

After the horrors, the unspeakable agonies, which humanity has endured as a consequence of the old political organization of the world it would be unreasonable to expect the peoples who have borne so much to accept as a basis of national and international order that which previously existed. The *status quo ante bellum* of society, as well as of boundaries and inter-

national relations, seems impossible. This, I believe, must be accepted as a necessary premise in developing a program for the future. I do not see how it can be avoided, and I am not sure that it would be wise to avoid it if we could.

I believe that we must also assume another premise in striving to solve the problems which lie before us. It is that the temper of the peoples who have been engaged in this interne-cine struggle will for some time after the war, and certainly immediately after it, be impressed with hostility and hatred for one another. The result of this mental attitude will make more difficult the establishment of a true equilibrium between nations, for it will produce an intemperate bias which will impair judgment and cause vindictiveness toward former enemies unless influential and sober-minded men resist this natural feeling and preserve their minds open and free, so that they will impartially weigh the truth and not impute guilt to the misguided or the ignorant. I know that this is a difficult thing to do, because it is humanly difficult to dissociate the instrument of evil from the one who conceives the evil and directs the instrument. But none the less sound common sense imposes upon us the duty of correcting, in so far as we are able, this tendency which will, if it continues, weaken materially the true spirit of justice which is essential to enduring peace.

You who are present to-night, believing in the brotherhood of man and trained in those precepts which have given the standard of right to this age, know, as I know, that the American people ought not, after the war is won, to cherish a pitiless hate for all those who have served the military dictators of Central Europe. We should discriminate between the intelligent and the ignorant, between the responsible and the irresponsible, between the master and the serf. It seems to me that it is the plain duty of all those who can influence public opinion in this country to so guide American thought that passion will not prevent the putting into operation of a wise plan for the readjustment of the world when peace is restored.

There is also another influence which Christian men and women must combat if this new era is to be an era of nobler life and loftier ideals than that which has ended in the grim scenes of death and suffering which we have witnessed. For

years we as a people have fallen more and more under the influence of materialism. Physical pleasure and ease became the objects of chief desire and their attainment the supreme purpose of life. Similar tendencies were manifest in other lands to an even greater degree than in America. The drift away from spirituality and toward materialism was a marked characteristic of the years immediately preceding the war, and the abnormal development of materialistic ideas in the German mind was a potent force, possibly *the* potent force, in arousing the lust for dominion, which was the underlying cause of this conflict of the nations.

To the problems of the future, problems which involve political institutions, industrial and commercial systems, and the obligations and rights of individuals as well as of nations, we must apply a more spiritual standard than the material one to which we have become accustomed. This we must do if we are to have a better and happier world. It is the verdict of history that a cold calculating materialism sows in the life of a people the seeds of degeneracy rather than the seeds of progress.

It is not unreasonable, in view of the recent past, to fear that there will be a strong tendency to apply materialistic doctrines to the state of peace following the war, and I am by no means sure that these doctrines, which will be termed "humanitarian," will not find warm supporters among sincere Christians, for it can hardly be denied that the Christian Church in later years has been increasingly disposed to emphasize works rather than faith. In these days of supreme physical effort and sacrifice we ought not to forget that the primary purpose of the Church is to implant in the hearts of men those spiritual truths which give to the individual a right conception of his duty to his fellow men and to society. In these truths and in their application to human conduct lies the only preventative against the continued spread of materialism and those theories of social order which disregard Christian ideals and Christian precepts and which will debase rather than elevate mankind.

It is my firm belief that unless these eternal principles become a living force in the transformation of the world the peace which will be established will not be an enduring peace. Materialism is an exaltation of the physical. Its chief end is earthly

happiness obtained in large measure through power and possessions. It is essentially selfish. It even bases morality and justice indirectly on selfish interest. A state of selfishness can hardly fail to produce ambition and greed and the efforts to gratify them. These are the evils which gave us militarism and war in the past, and so will they again if they are permitted to dominate men and governments. Materialism as the basic idea of the new order of things will revive those very impulses to do evil which the world to-day abhors.

Humanity is not unprepared to receive the great spiritual truths which should be the foundation of the relations between men and between nations if we are to have a continuing state of peace. War, with all its appeal to the primitive instincts of man, has a measure of compensation in that it compels men who go forth to battle to turn their thoughts to that which lies beyond this life as they realize its uncertainty. And not alone to those who face danger and sudden death in the service of their country do these thoughts come, but also to those millions at home who await with anxious hearts in fear and hope for loved ones across the sea. The life of America is sobered by the peril of her sons. The mind turns instinctively to divine protection and to the expectation of eternity. The spirit of the nation is reaching forward and upward to the Supreme Being for strength and counsel.

There has never been, in my opinion, a time when the Christian Church could labor in a more fertile field, not alone by ministering to the moral and physical needs of the men who are fighting our battles, great as that duty is, but also by arousing in them the spiritual fortitude to face death and suffering with no fear for the future and by giving to those who grieve the comfort that this life is not the end.

In thus serving the present the Church will render a lasting service to the future by implanting the principles of Christianity in the souls of men, in the souls of nations. The new era born in blood and fire on the battle fields of Europe must be a Christian era in reality and not alone in name. The years to come must be years of fraternity and common purpose. International injustice must cease. All men must be free from the oppression of arbitrary power. Unreasoning class hatreds and

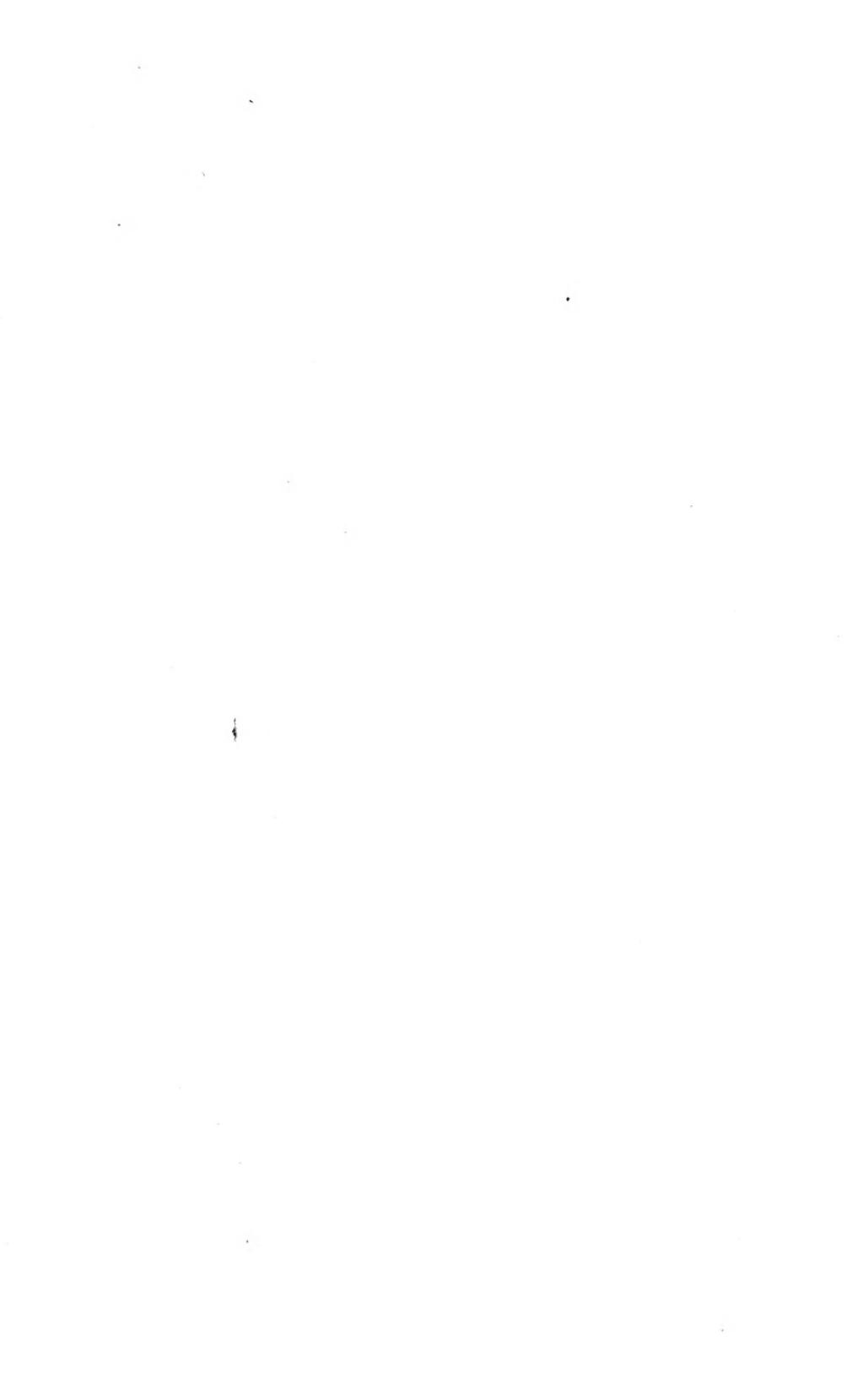
class tyrannies must come to an end. Society must be organized on principles of justice and liberty. The world must be ruled by the dominant will to do that which is right. I see no other complete solution to the great problems which will soon engross the thought of mankind, no other means of destroying forever that soulless materialism which plunged the nations into these years of agony.

To prepare the way for the coming of this new era, to inculcate the truth in the hearts of men, to bring them into the right attitude toward God and toward mankind, is the greatest service that can be rendered to the present generation and to future generations, whose happiness depends on the principles which will govern the reorganization of society.

There is no time to be lost if this nation is to be made ready to enter with the right spirit and the right principles upon the task of readjustment and reconstruction. There is no time to be lost, because the day is drawing near when the spirit of liberty will stand triumphant above the spirit of militarism, of which the Central Empires are possessed. The millions of America's bravest and best, the very flower of her manhood, who have crossed the sea or are preparing to embark are the earnest of victory. For four long years the armies of the Allies have heroically withstood the legions of the Beast. These war-worn veterans, whose unfaltering valor knows no equal, are to-day, with the splendid men of this Republic by their side, sweeping back the invaders broken in spirit, sullen and hopeless. It is the beginning of the end. The hour of triumph is drawing near. The day of the war lords is almost over.

To those noble Americans, our friends and brothers, to those who have made the supreme sacrifice, and to those who have dedicated their lives to the cause of their country, to the brave men of the allied nations who have so gallantly died that liberty might live, we owe a debt which imposes on us the obligation of making certain that their service and sacrifice have not been in vain. They fought and are fighting for a better world; it lies with us to do our part to make it better.





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